

Interrogating Trudeau's Brand of Equality "Because it's 2015"

by Julia Hartviksen

Last week, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper tendered his resignation after nearly ten years of Conservative government under his leadership. On Wednesday, Justin Trudeau was sworn in as Canada's new Prime Minister, after one of the longest election periods in Canadian history. He took his oath alongside his newly appointed cabinet of 15 women and 15 men, hailed as the most diverse cabinet Canada has ever seen. Some critics challenged his commitment to gender parity on the assumption that equal representation of men and women in cabinet would somehow compromise the merit of candidates appointed to minsters. Yet, as Claire Annesley, Karen Beckwith and Susan Franceschet rightfully **point out**,

Trudeau said he wanted a cabinet that 'looks like Canada'. Here he is invoking an alternative, but significant interpretation of merit. Why? As he said himself; **'it's 2015'**

Certainly, **scrolling down the list** of Prime Minister Trudeau's newly sworn-in Ministers reveals an impressively diverse group of parliamentarians from across the country – perhaps refreshing for many Canadians disillusioned by the over-representation of white men in Stephen Harper's recent, **larger-than-life cabinets**. The youngest minister sworn in was Maryam Monsef, aged 30, who came to Canada from Afghanistan as a refugee at the age of 11. Now Minister of Democratic Institutions, Minister Monsef's appointment carries immense political symbolism in a country where just weeks ago, Canada's response to the refugee crisis in Syria became a salient election issue. Other notable appointments include Carla Qualtrough, a three-time Paralympic Games medalist who was sworn in as Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities; and **Jody Wilson-Raybould**, Canada's first Aboriginal federal Minister of Justice, whose appointment is a welcome change from the antagonism of previous Ministers of Justice vis-à-vis Aboriginal peoples in Canada. My own Member of Parliament for the constituency of Thunder Bay-Superior North, Patty Hajdu, was sworn in as Minister for Status of Women. She will surely be an important voice for Northern Ontario as she rebuilds the ministry that Harper's administration completely decimated. Further, her role will be essential in fulfilling Prime Minister Trudeau's promise to launch an inquiry into endemic levels of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Ultimately, Prime Minister Trudeau's commitment to gender parity in his cabinet certainly did not preclude a wealth of experienced, knowledgeable Ministers from being appointed; rather, it ensured it.



And yet, I remain a settler unsettled: while many Canadians celebrate the ousting of Stephen Harper, I remain skeptical about Prime Minister Trudeau and his commitment to real change. Trudeau stated he wanted to appoint of a cabinet that 'looks like Canada', with gender parity because it's 2015. Moving beyond questions of merit and gender parity, what does Canada in 2015 *really* look like? Gender parity in Canadian politics is undoubtedly an important issue, but in justifying his choice for gender equality in his cabinet, Prime Minister was feeding a problematic progress narrative that reads: Canada gets with the times. But for whom does such "progress" count, and what does this appeal to modernity mean?

Importantly, not all ministries are created equally. While there have been an equal number of extremely qualified women and men appointed, men hold some of the most pivotal portfolios of Defense, Finance and Foreign Affairs. Further, three days after the historic cabinet appointments, it became clear that, after reading between the lines of the job descriptions, 5 of the 15 women cabinet ministers – including Ministers Hajdu and Qualtraugh – were **actually** appointed to more **junior-level** positions, known as Ministers of State. Canadian Ministers of State are paid CAD\$20 000 less than other cabinet ministers; therefore, one third of the women appointed to cabinet would still be receiving a lower salary than other cabinet members. The Liberal party claims that this technicality will be changed retroactively and that these five women will be paid the same as other ministers, though at the time this post was written, it still remains unclear as to when this change will take effect, or why they were named Ministers of State in the first place.

Furthermore, while Prime Minister Trudeau is expected to name **Katie Telford**, the Liberal Party national campaign director, his new Chief of Staff, the key role of leader in the Prime Minister's transition team has gone to Peter Harder. Harder is the president of the Canada China Business Council, "a **powerful group** of corporate and bureaucratic strivers that is functionally indistinguishable from the old and discredited Liberal party establishment that Canadian voters unseated a decade ago." So while Canadians watched the swearing-in of the most diverse cabinet in Canadian history from outside Rideau Hall, the behind-the-scenes gender power dynamics, less visible to the public eye, may point to some of the limits of Prime Minister Trudeau's brand of progress and equality.

And what does Canada look like in 2015 anyway? Arguably, the image of Canada tolerant, welcoming, diverse Canada is also a (neo)colonial construct. While Canada became the first country in the world to institute multiculturalism as official government policy in 1971, Canada's brand of multiculturalism is not without its limitations. This policy emerged the same year former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau (the current Prime Minister's father) failed to institute the "**White Paper**", which aimed to erase the legal category of "Indian" and end state treaty obligations rather than deal with the systemic issues of racism and inequality faced by Aboriginal people in Canada. In instituting the more palatable **multiculturalist approach**, all Canadian citizens and their cultural heritages were made equal – but only in so far as their cultural approaches did not infringe on the status quo.

A more contemporary example of this can be seen in current Prime Minister Trudeau's recent voting record. Harper's Conservatives came under fire for passing a controversial Bill S-7, the "**Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act**" in June, which has been critiqued by many groups for its racist and implied Islamophobic undertones. Yet, Canadians seem quick to forget that Prime Minister Trudeau and his Liberal Party supported and **voted with the Conservatives on this bill** Prime Minister Trudeau also was **absent for the vote on Bill C-24**, the "Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act", which created a two-tier structure of Canadian citizenship for dual-citizenship holders (he has since criticized the law, promising to repeal it). The Prime Minister also **voted for Harper's controversial Bill C-51**, the "Anti-Terrorism Act", which gave government spy agencies CSIS and CSEC – the Canadian equivalents to MI-5 and GCHQ, respectively – the right to spy on citizens without a warrant and has been critiqued as being **unconstitutional**. Arguably, these controversial pieces of legislation sought to alienate some Canadians from others on racial grounds, and Prime Minister Trudeau – for whom a three-word sound bite of a progress narrative has gone viral – either actively supported them, or did nothing to challenge them.



Prime Minister Trudeau **further came under fire** during the Up for Debate leaders' debate on women's issues during the run-up to the election, when he argued that violence against women was an issue problematic to "some communities", and certain types of music as well as "shifting parental roles" were in part to blame for the issue. As Desmond Cole, a Toronto-based journalist **asks**,

Is it a coincidence that two of the three factors Trudeau cited about violence against women are well-worn stereotypes about black people?

Importantly, gender and race are not isolated, check-box categories; as Kimberlé Crenshaw illustrates through her work on intersectionality, systems of oppressions are interlocking[1]. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins points out that intersectionality shows us how "oppressions work together in producing injustice", which she argues are organized in a matrix of domination[2]. Taken from this perspective, then, Prime Minister Trudeau's brand of gender equality appears to be isolated from larger debates on racism in Canada and is thus superficial at best, with no deeper engagement beyond multiculturalism as official policy.

The Canadian political system, much like the British system, is a Westminster model with a first-past-the-post voting system. This means that Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberal Party of Canada, with only **39.5% of the vote**, are forming government with a majority of the 335 seats in the Canadian government. Similarly, Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party of Canada formed a majority government with **39.6% of the vote**, in 2011. While Prime Minister Trudeau has made **some ambitious promises** (including electoral reform), his recent voting record gives cause for alarm. With a majority of the seats, virtually anything is possible for the Liberals – including broken promises and the further implementation of the problematic agenda they have supported in the past.

I don't want to rain on anyone's parade. Importantly, Canada's new Prime Minister has proven that gender parity and diversity in politics does not come at the expense of merit – and this may be an important first step for gender equality in Canadian politics. And yes, Prime Minister Trudeau is right: it's 2015. But we still have a lot of work to do.

[1] Crenshaw, K. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140: 139-167.

[2] Hill Collins, P. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd Ed.) New York: Routledge, p. 18.



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